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COLONEL RECOUNTS HOW NORTH RAN CONTRA OPERATION

He Says He Understood They
Were Working for Reagan
—Problems Described

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WASHINGTON, May 27 — A former Air Force colonel described in detail today how Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North directed the secret aerial supply of munitions for the Nicaraguan rebels at a time when the program was dogged by almost comical problems.

P The former officer, Robert C. Dutton, who was the operation's on-the-ground manager, said it was his understanding that he and Colonel North were working for President Reagan. Several previous witnesses have said the same thing. At the time, the use of Federal funds and the involvement of Government personnel in such an airlift had been banned by Congress.

He said the airlift had been unable to get munitions and other supplies to the contras for months because of inexperience and poor communications. On several occasions, a touchy general in El Salvador, unhappy about the operation, locked up some of the planes, he said. And he described bickering and feuding among operatives in Central America. [Excerpts, page A12.]

Colonel Dutton said he had reported the troubles afflicting the airlift to Colonel North on a daily basis.

Reagan Accuses the Press

As the question of Mr. Reagan's awareness of efforts to supply military goods to the contras arose again at the Congressional hearings, the President told foreign journalists that he had not been involved in illegal acts and blamed the press for creating a false impression that he had. [Page A12.]

A Later today, Felix Rodriguez, who served as a liaison between Colonel North's contra-supply operation and the authorities in El Salvador, and who was one of the operatives who bickered with Colonel Dutton, said he had never discussed the operation with Vice President Bush. Other witnesses had raised the possibility that such a discussion might have occurred. Mr. Bush has said he had no such conversation.

Colonel Dutton said Colonel North

had told him "we were working for the President of the United States," adding, "You'll never get a medal for this, but some day the President will shake your hand and thank you."

A White House spokesman said he had no comment on Colonel Dutton's testimony.

In September 1986, Colonel Dutton added, he prepared a photo album showing the airlift's planes and where drops had been made successfully, and Colonel North was so pleased he said he wanted to "show it to his top boss." Colonel Dutton said he believed this meant President Reagan.

Ken Ballen, a staff counsel to the House committee, asked an agent from the Federal Bureau of Investigation to show Colonel Dutton a photo album found in Colonel North's White House safe. The plastic pages were covered with ink, indicating that the F.B.I. had been looking for fingerprints, Colonel Dutton observed. A Congressional investigator said later that the F.B.I. had not informed the committee whether any fingerprints had been found.

A Conflict in Testimony

In other testimony, Colonel Dutton contradicted earlier statements by Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord about a plan to sell or lease the airlift's planes and crews to the Central Intelligence Agency after Congress lifted the ban on aid to the contras last year and voted \$100 million in aid to them.

Colonel Dutton said the idea to sell or lease the airlift, though they had been obtained with profits on arms sales to Iran, came from General Secord, his boss at Stanford Technology Trading Group International in Virginia. But General Secord testified three weeks ago that the plan was "Bob Dutton's, not mine."

Senator Warren B. Rudman, Republican of New Hampshire and vice chairman of the Senate committee, said the difference in testimony was important and indicated he believed Colonel Dutton. General Secord has denied charges he was profiteering from the Iran and contra operations.

A former pilot in Indochina and specialist in covert operations, Colonel Dutton also made these disclosures:

A An administrative assistant at Stanford Technology had gone to Miami to pick up an envelope with \$16,000 in cash that she delivered to Colonel North. Colonel Dutton said he did not know what the money was for. But the disclosure followed reports last week that Colonel North had cashed nearly \$2,500 in travelers checks apparently for his personal use that had been intended for the contras.

A Colonel Dutton added to growing evidence that some C.I.A. officials had played an important role in helping the contras. He testified that the C.I.A. station chief in Costa Rica, known as Tomas Castillo, had provided routine

information on the location of contra units and tried to help arrange air-drops to them. There was "no way" the operation could have succeeded, even to the extent it did, without help from these C.I.A. officers, he said.

Mr. Castillo and a United States military officer in Costa Rica arranged for two of Colonel Dutton's planes to be refueled at the international airport in San José, Costa Rica, after trying to make drops in Nicaragua last year. Colonel Dutton said he could not remember who paid for the fuel, but a Congressional investigator said it may have been paid out of C.I.A. or United States military funds, violating the Congressional ban.

The Airlift's Afflictions

Much of Colonel Dutton's testimony was spent recalling the troubles that afflicted the airlift. When Colonel Dutton hired a British air crew to fly into Nicaragua, for example, the pilots turned out to be helicopter pilots, not airplane pilots.

One time a C-123 belonging to the airlift got stuck in mud. At other times, Juan Rafael Bustillo, the Chief of Staff of the Salvadoran Air Force, who commanded the base where the airlift operated, would "simply lock the gate," keeping the American crews out, Colonel Dutton recounted.

Mr. Rodriguez, the day's second witness, described himself as a dedicated anti-Communist who worked for the C.I.A. in Central America and elsewhere in the 1960's and 70's. He said he returned to Central America in 1985 as an unpaid adviser to help the Salvadoran Government in its war against insurgents.

Mr. Rodriguez, who sometimes used the name Max Gomez, began aiding the contra-supply operation at Colonel North's request. He said he never trusted General Secord or Colonel Dutton and, at one point, went to Washington to complain about them to Colonel North.

He said he was in Colonel North's office one day last year when Congress was debating the renewal of official aid to the contras. At one point, he said, Colonel North pointed to the Congressional debate on television and remarked that "those people want me, but they can't touch me" because he was in favor with "the old man."